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**James P. Mackey, Christianity and Creation: The Essence of the Christian Faith and Its Future among Religions (London: Continuum, 2006) & Jesus of Nazareth: The Life, the Faith and the Future of the Prophet (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008)**

### Citation for published version:

Fergusson, D 2009, 'James P. Mackey, *Christianity and Creation: The Essence of the Christian Faith and Its Future among Religions* (London: Continuum, 2006) & *Jesus of Nazareth: The Life, the Faith and the Future of the Prophet* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008)', *Expository Times*, vol. 120, pp. 334-336.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610394618>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524610394618](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610394618)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Expository Times

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James P. Mackey, *Christianity and Creation: The Essence of the Christian Faith and Its Future among Religions* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. xix + 403; *Jesus of Nazareth: The Life, the Faith and the Future of the Prophet* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008), pp. 297. £13.99

Since retiring from the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Systematic Theology in Edinburgh to his home town of Waterford in Ireland, Jim Mackey has continued to research and teach at Trinity College, Dublin. These latest books represent a summation of his work – his ‘theological endgame’, as he describes it – over the best part of half a century. As with all his writings, these are lively, readable, insightful, witty and highly provocative.

Encompassing all the loci of Christian doctrine, *Christianity and Creation* offers a striking theological vision. At the same time, Mackey also registers his dissatisfaction with important elements of the Christian tradition, a frustration with many of the emphases of contemporary theology, and a conviction about what lies at the heart of all true religion, especially that embodied by Jesus of Nazareth. While most of the lines of thought represented are already developed in other writings – especially his work on christology, the Trinity and Celtic religious traditions – the bold construction of a systematic theology around the controlling theme of creation (a topic on which Mackey has lectured for many years) is quite new. Even more remarkable is his apparent indebtedness to Nietzsche in this respect.

According to Mackey, the problems that were bequeathed to 20<sup>th</sup> century theology were never fully addressed by the proposals and constructions that followed. These problems include issues raised by historical criticism of the Bible, the disjunction of revelation from secular history and grace from nature, the scientific impossibility of defending a spatio-temporal original fall, and those sin-driven, exclusivist paradigms that tended to divide the human race into the saved and the damned – the church functioning as the indispensable instrument for the realisation of such eschatological outcomes. Instead of breaking radically with those moves that had dominated the discipline for centuries, modern thinkers offered a series of timid revisions to this older ‘franchise’ theology – a system of thought providing unique access to the divine and ‘franchised’ only to the thinkers of church. What then resulted was a continuation of dated, exclusivist traditions that could no longer muster credibility in a more pluralist and globalised age. One route beyond this impasse was never followed very far, and that is the theology of creation. This could have articulated a religious vision that preceded and controlled subsequent assertions about human sin, the person and work of Christ, sacramental grace and the relationship of the church to other religions. Theologians generally eschewed this path, although some philosophers did rather better. Thus Mackey sets himself the task of pursuing this trajectory. What emerges is a radically revised Christian theology. It offer us a positive theological vision but one that arrives in the slipstream of some relentless deconstruction of the tradition.

For Mackey, the universe is the good and gracious expression of its Creator who in essence is infinite, limitless and formless. Only in the continuous act of creating, does God come to self-expression. This is achieved, though not uniquely or irrevocably, in human co-creators who experience and embody the beauty and goodness of God in their lives. The scope of this creative and redeeming work is not the church but the entire creation. To this extent, the theology presented here is always open to the wisdom and outcomes of other philosophies and religions.

While much of the discussion is deeply critical of the Augustinian tradition (in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant variants), other thinkers are rehabilitated. The neo-Platonist account of emanation and outpouring provides the dominant imagery. Plotinus, John Scotus Erigena, Hegel and Nietzsche are all valorized for their contributions to this account of the God-world relationship. Even Pelagius is extolled for his less excessive account of sin, and the insistence upon human freedom, although Mackey is anything but naïve in his account of the human condition. The central doctrines of the faith – incarnation and Trinity – are shown to contain important mythological elements that connect with similar themes in other religions and philosophies. If their symbolic status is respected, we can avoid those implausible rationalist constructions of dogma to which modern ears have become deaf. (Here Mackey is especially hostile to the modern preference for the social model of the Trinity which he regards as absurd.) Finally there is a place for accommodating insights, motifs and figures (such as the Celtic goddess) in expressing the richness and diversity of the divine life outpoured into our own. Thus Mackey’s longstanding work on Celtic religion is used to offer a more integrated and accommodationist account of the religious understanding.

Several comments might be ventured. This is a mature piece of writing that maintains a single religious vision throughout its exploration of different doctrines and theological controversies. It bears the fruit of many years of theological reflection and reconsideration, facilitated by in part by teaching across the syllabus. Frequent insights are offered almost as asides – ‘most Christians to this day are happy, if unwitting Apollinarians’ (165). Although it maintains a strong critical and revisionary edge, it is always engaged with and respectful of the tradition out of which it emerges. As such it is an example of good practice that might be emulated by many younger theologians too readily pressurised by institutional constraints into premature publication of their ideas.

The genre of the book, however, is unusual. Deliberately forsaking footnotes and references, Mackey’s narrative flows easily and sometimes with deceptive simplicity. This makes for good reading. Yet other scholars will be frustrated by citations without reference and the lack of the usual bibliographical apparatus that characterises work in this field. Instead he offers us a prefatory list of some of his own earlier and most relevant theological works, although this list surprisingly omits his major work on the *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (1983). Furthermore, the absence of an index to a single-volume systematic theology of over 400 pages is surely a lamentable failure on the part of the publisher and one that will hamper its use. Perhaps this can be remedied in a second edition.

Despite his impatience with much of the Christian tradition, Mackey shows himself to be deeply conversant with its highways and byways. There is sustained discussion of Scripture throughout this study and frequent diversions to consider historical figures and movements. All this enhances the quality of the work, particularly in the important opening chapter on creation. Moreover, despite its relentless criticism of elements of the theological tradition, it remains a serious and constructive piece of work that offers an attractive theological vision. And notwithstanding its ecumenical and inter-faith inclusiveness of his approach it also reveals a strong christocentrism. Barth once famously conceded that Scheiermacher too was a lover of Jesus. The same might be said of Mackey. In some ways, this is strangely occluded by the relentless polemics against traditional accounts of the atonement in *Christianity and Creation*, although it emerges more clearly in the second companion volume.

Those critics, more favourably disposed to traditional formulations, will query Mackey’s doctrine of God, especially in relation to its Hegelian leanings. There is little discussion of how he would respond to the standard charges levelled against absolute idealism or its (not-so-distant) relative process theology. Is there here a loss of divine transcendence which subsequently de-personalises the God-world relationship? Does a heavily emanationist and immanentist account of revelation not finally mute those powerful Biblical images of divine encounter, address and speech culminating in the coming of the Word and the church’s gospel? The theologians of the early church opted swiftly and unanimously in favour of creation out of nothing partly to resist notions of the world emanating from the divine being. This was done in order to make sense of Scriptural convictions about God’s interaction with the created order. From a Nietzschean perspective, one might see their approach merely as an aggrandising of the concept of God. Yet there remain issues around the nature of divine love and grace which seem to require this more fully personalised account of the creator-creature nexus. To put the point rather differently, does the grace of God not require a stronger account of transcendence as its necessary condition? Can the ground of being really be said to love us? Is Jesus himself not indebted to Hebraic notions of divine personhood and transcendence. Of course, Mackey is fully aware of these rejoinders and has engaged with them over many years. If the discussion is not closed, it has nevertheless received further impetus from his bold, unapologetic and detailed study.

*Jesus of Nazareth* represents a more popular account of the same theological vision. Again eschewing footnotes and bibliographical citations, Mackey engages patiently with Scripture and tradition in expounding his account of Jesus as prophet and Son of God. Of all his writings, this is perhaps his most iconoclastic. The criticism of his own and other churches is relentless, as also his dismissal of doctrines such as original sin, penal substitution and predestination that have become oppressive in the hands of ruling clerical elites, whether Catholic or Protestant. In much the same way as Jesus preached the message of God’s kingdom in spite of the religious and secular authorities of his day, so Mackey argues for an authentic experience of the divine Spirit that is neither controlled nor distorted by today’s franchise holders. To give but one example, he writes, ‘It would be comic were it not also so tragic to witness the current and repetitive papal warnings against the corrosion of the Christian faith by the intrusion of a secular ethos, when the offices and the office from which these warnings emanate with grinding regularity provide what might well be the most striking example in the history of Christianity of the intrusion of a secular ethos of ruling power into the institutions of leadership in some of the principal

Christian churches.’ (40) A good deal of this iconoclasm hits the target – is the doctrine of double predestination not a powerful candidate for the worst doctrine every invented by theologians anywhere?

Running through his christology is a deep connection with the doctrine of creation outlined above. Jesus preaches and exemplifies the power and grace of the divine spirit that is ever-resourceful and which, in spite of our worst excesses, constantly gives itself to us. All this is expressed primarily in images, symbols, myths and meals (herein lies the meaning of the eucharist) which are the lifeblood of every human culture and which are frequently distorted whether by a secular scientism or an inflated ecclesiastical conceptuality. In seeking to argue this thesis, Mackey engages in a good deal of deconstruction. His frequent asides on a host of theological issues are frequently wise, often witty and sometimes devastating. And, as in the aforementioned book, there is an intrinsic openness to indigenous traditions and other world religions.

What emerges is not surprisingly an account of Jesus that in some respects resembles the more deflationary liberal christologies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. Harnack’s. Its closest contemporary analogue might be that of John Hick, though here there is a greater depth of engagement with the Christian tradition. The myth of the incarnation is to be treated in terms of inspiration rather than a more literal assumption of flesh by the second person of the divine Trinity. This ‘myth’ is defended by Mackey with a good deal of intellectual force, spiritual insight and exegetical effort. Nevertheless, his work can be demanding of his readership to the extent that one wonders how accessible this material will be for a wider audience. Students and scholars may once more lament the lack of an index for finding their way around the material.

Again critics will inevitably raise questions about the adequacy of Mackey’s account. There is, for example, near total silence on the subject of the resurrection. Is not the conviction that Jesus is risen and present to the church (in a manner quite unlike that of John the Baptist to his followers) at the centre of the faith of the first Christians as in 1 Corinthians 15? Is a reduced account of the experience of the ‘spirit of Jesus’ sufficient to make sense of this? Mackey’s response will be along the lines that this is all that we can sensibly construct from the text, and that it is all that we need for the practice of a chastened faith in the modern world. Yet this is a conversation that is worth having, and Mackey has made a typically forceful contribution to it. One might venture the judgement that these two volumes are conjointly the most compelling presentation of a revitalised liberal theology for a more pluralist age. Much of what Mackey has said as teacher, colleague and writer continues to entertain and challenge in almost equal measure. These books are no exception – they deserve to be widely read and discussed.

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